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ABSTRACT

The Beijing Foreign Languages Institute is one of about 60 colleges and universities in the People's Republic of China that is directly under the Ministry of Education. Attached to the Institute are a high school and an elementary school where students start learning foreign languages in third grade. Classroom teaching is supplemented by extra-curricular activities and interaction between teachers and students outside class time. Courses are designed so that students will become professionally competent and knowledgeable about the historical, cultural, social, political, and economic situation of the country whose language they are studying. Courses are required in intensive and extensive reading, writing, written and oral translation, listening, speaking, world history, world geography, and a second foreign language. In addition, a number of electives are offered. Courses are conducted in English and, as much as possible, authentic documents are chosen for study. Linguistic and stylistic points are explained in detail, as well as structures and usages peculiar to the English language. There is extensive practice through oral and written exercises, especially paraphrasing, to enable students to learn to think in English. During the last two years the emphasis has been on written translation and oral interpretation. (AMH)

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# Beijing Foreign Languages Institute and Its English Teaching

Wu Bing

Beijing Foreign Languages Institute

Beijing Foreign Languages Institute is a regular four-year college where students learn foreign languages and study the cultures and societies in which the languages are embedded. There are, as far as I know, approximately ten institutes of this kind throughout China. They are called institutes to differentiate them from more comprehensive institutions of higher education such as Beijing and Nanjing Universities, where not only languages but also natural and social sciences and liberal arts are taught.

Since I am a teacher at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, I will concentrate on a description of this school and an explanation of how English is taught there. The other foreign languages institutes in China are operated more or less along the same lines, with minor differences.

Beijing Foreign Languages Institute is one of the 60 or so key colleges and universities in the People's Republic of China. By key colleges and universities I mean schools which are directly under the Ministry of Education and have the advantage of more experienced teachers, more funds and equipment, and better students. We have better students because we can select the best of the students who sit for the unified nationwide college entrance examinations. Our language students, in fact, have to go through an oral foreign language exam or interview in addition to the

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written exams which they take with other students, and only those who have attained high grades in all subjects and have done very well in their written English and Chinese exams can ever hope to be chosen for such interviews.

The institute also accepts graduate students and young English teachers from other colleges for advanced studies. In addition, there are a few foreign students.

Attached to the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute are a high school and an elementary school, where youngsters begin to learn a foreign language in the third grade. The students of these schools are chosen from ordinary elementary and high schools. They study the same subjects as the other children except that there is more emphasis on a particular foreign language--be it English, French, German, Japanese, Spanish, or Russian. We also have a branch institute in the city.

There are six departments in the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Asian and African Languages, and Eastern European Languages. These six departments offer 27 specialities--English, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, Burmese, Malay, Sinhalese, Indonesian, Arabic, Swahili, Hausa, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian, Albanian, German, and Swedish. The reason we teach so many languages is that we want to make friends with people of other countries and we believe that foreign languages are the tools that will enable us to communicate with them, to understand them better, and to learn more about their cultures and fine traditions, and their science and technology. It is also our hope that when our foreign friends come to China, they may feel more at home when they find someone speaking their

own language. We respect other nations, and we respect other peoples' right to speak their native languages. When a distinguished foreign guest or friend comes to China and wishes to make a speech in his own language, we will have someone to interpret it for him. And when our leaders visit a foreign country, they would certainly like to address the audience through a Chinese interpreter who speaks the language of the host country.

Our students, when they graduate, will be interpreters, translators, and college teachers. A great number of our graduates work in Chinese embassies and consulates abroad. It is not exaggerating to say that wherever there is a Chinese embassy or consulate, you'll surely find a Beijing Foreign Languages Institute graduate. As teachers of the institute, we are quite proud of the fact that our students are working effectively all over the world.

Most of the teachers in our institute are Chinese, but we also have some 50 foreign teachers from 19 countries. One may not be fully aware of what an international family we are until one sees the children of our day-care center playing together on the campus. Children with blond hair and dark curly hair mix with children with dark straight hair, and they all speak Chinese!

In addition to teaching, we edit language teaching and learning periodicals as well as translation journals widely circulated in the country, compile dictionaries, handbooks, and foreign language textbooks, and provide annotated reading materials and simplified or adapted versions of originals to the general public as well as our own students. So far we have published six dictionaries, including a Chinese-English dictionary, and there are 17 more dictionaries under compilation.

Teachers play an active part in activities outside school, such as helping to dub in motion pictures and serving as interpreters or translators for various ministries at international conferences. Take the English Department, for example. Besides doing all the jobs mentioned above, it also helps to train United Nations translators and simultaneous interpreters and has been entrusted by the Ministry of Education with the responsibility of organizing the nationwide English programs on TV and radio.

Classroom teaching is the chief means of imparting knowledge. But there are many extracurricular activities to help the student master the language and learn more about the country and the culture of the people whose language he is studying. There are films, both feature and documentary, and talks by well-known figures such as Felix Greene, Han Su-yin, and Randolph Quirk and also by foreign teachers from our school and from other colleges. Students of the English Department put on plays at least once a year and organize English evenings when English songs are sung and poems recited. There are also composition contests and English "wall papers." The "wall papers" are papers, edited by the students themselves, that are put on the walls of classrooms so that everybody can read and profit by them. They display good compositions, newspaper clippings, stories, puzzles, etc.--in short, all that is informative, interesting, and helpful. Students go on practice trips as tourist guides and help to translate materials from English into Chinese for factories and other institutions.

In China, all college students live in school dormitories and the great majority of college teachers live on the campus. Consequently, there is much interaction between teachers and students. Teachers often go to

visit students in their dormitories, especially on the eve of a new semester or when a student is ill. Students feel free to drop in on the teachers, seeking advice on various matters. During the semester there will be a few outings (by bike, usually) to parks or places of historic interest or scenic beauty. At the end of the semester and on such festivals as New Year's Eve, there will usually be parties in each small class. (A class has 15 to 20 students.) On such occasions, classrooms are decorated and refreshments served. There are games and performances, and teachers are invariably asked to give some performance. During the winter vacation, students from other cities or provinces who do not go home will be invited to spend the Chinese New Year at teachers' homes. Very often, at the end of the school year in July, when students advance to a higher grade, a group picture is taken with the teachers in the middle. Each individual is given a copy of the photo to keep as a reminder of the happy and hard-working days they have spent together.

To ensure that our students will become effective translators, interpreters, and teachers, courses are designed so that students may be professionally competent and generally knowledgeable about the present political and economical situation of the country and the history, culture, and religion of the people whose language they are studying. Courses are theory-oriented as well as skill-oriented, culture-and-society-oriented as well as language-oriented. In the first two years, the emphasis is on the five language skills, that is, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. In the last two years, more elective courses are offered, and the emphasis is on intellectual skills. In the English Department, for example, the required courses are reading, writing, written and oral

translation, listening, speaking, world history, world geography, and a second foreign language. Some of the elective courses are English grammar and phonology, English lexicology, English stylistics, English and American literature, modern international relations, introduction to world economics, European survey, survey of Asia and Africa, survey of the Americas and Oceania, and American culture and society. There are also Chinese language courses and courses in political studies offered in Chinese.

Two major courses offered in the first two years are intensive and extensive reading. They are complementary courses designed to teach many skills. Materials chosen for intensive reading vary widely in type, style, and content. Our students study plays, philosophical essays, popular-science writings, well-known speeches, chapters from novels and memoirs, and articles chosen from newspapers, magazines, and encyclopedias. Some of the authors they study are Winston Churchill, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain, Jack London, Martin Luther King, James Baldwin, and Herman Wouk. Among the intensive reading materials are works on Beethoven, Leonardo da Vinci, World War II, Saudi Arabia, Hiroshima today, the magic role computers play in our lives, and the functions of such vital organs of the human body as the heart, the liver, the lungs, and the kidneys. Diversified as they are, the materials chosen have several things in common: they are authentic English writings with literary and informational value; they are culturally representative; and they are written in standard English.

Intensive reading courses are conducted in English. Texts are read for information, comprehension, appreciation, and application. The emphasis is on a thorough understanding of both the linguistic and cultural items

in the selection. We usually spend six to eight hours (that is, one to two weeks) on a lesson of three to eight pages. The teacher gives an introduction to the material and provides background information or some explanation of cultural differences. When the subject matter is Beethoven and Leonardo da Vinci, for example, there are brief accounts of their lives and important works and some background information about the Renaissance; the teacher also brings reproductions of their works to the classroon--students enjoy the Ninth Symphony and admire the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper. When Saudi Arabia is the subject matter, students are introduced briefly to the country's geographical location and history, its historical and present relationship with China, its present ruler, the Islamic religion and some of the important practices of the Moslems, and the vital role Saudi Arabia plays in the modern world, which cannot do without Saudi oil. Much of this the students have no doubt learned in their history and geography classes in high school, but in college the information is repeated and supplemented in English.

Language points--phonological, grammatical, and lexical--are explained in detail. Long and complicated sentences are analyzed so that students may know how an English sentence is constructed. Active verbs such as "keep," "take," and "make" are studied in context, and the teacher also helps to enlarge the students' vocabulary by introducing other meanings and other uses of each verb. Set expressions, idioms, and sentence patterns are explained, and the students are drilled on them in class. In more advanced classes, synonyms such as "huge" and "vast" are compared and differentiated so that students will use them in the appropriate context. The students' attention will be called to collocations, for when Chinese students write in English, they tend to give a literal translation

of what they would write in Chinese and are often not aware that certain English words can go with only certain other words.

Take the lesson "A Middle Eastern Bazaar," for example. When students read "little donkeys...thread their way among..." and "donkey-boys clearing a way for themselves," the teacher will give orally other collocations and examples such as:

ask one's way

bar/block one's way

cut/fight one's way through the enemy's ranks

edge/elbow/push/squeeze one's way through a crowd

feel one's way up the stairs/in the dark

lose one's way in a forest

find one's way through a forest/out of the woods/to a place

make one's way out/home

pick one's way across the rough and rocky hillside

toil/work one's way through life/college

The idea is winning its way throughout the world.

A ship ploughs its way across the bay.

So-and-so wormed his way onto the committee/board.

In the same lesson words used to describe sound are distinguished from one another. Students are told that "tinkling" is a succession of light, ringing sounds like those of a small bell; that "to bang" is to hit violently, to make a loud noise (e.g., one bangs a door); and that "to clash" is to make a loud, broken, confused noise as when metal objects strike together (e.g., swords and cymbals clash). The teacher explains that, besides the girders mentioned in the text, doors and floors may also "creak" and that "creaking" is different from "rumbling," which is

a deep, heavy, and continuous sound such as that made by tanks, thunder, freight trains, and armored cars.

The teacher also points out other structures and usages peculiar to the English language. For instance, in the text we read of "a cool, dark cavern which extends as far as the eye can see" and "a tinkling and banging and clashing begins to strike your ear." The teacher explains why the words "eye" and "ear" are used in the singular: they do not mean the concrete organs of sight or hearing but rather something abstract. To show that these words are often used figuratively, the teacher gives examples as follows:

She has an eye for beauty.

She has an ear for music.

The boy has a sharp eye.

The big poster caught my eye.

Keep an eye on that mischievous boy.

To turn a blind eye/a deaf ear to something/somebody

His words were unpleasant to the ear.

The view was pleasing to the eye.

When explaining the structure "It is a vast cavern of a room," the teacher gives examples such as:

Jurgis had to work in the hell of a fertilizer factory.

He was a tyrant of a landlord.

They live in a palace/match-box of a house.

She is a kitten of a girl.

Before him stood a little shrimp of a fellow.

He has a devil/a lamb of a temper.

There is much give and take in class besides the teacher's explanations. After a lesson is thoroughly explained, the teacher helps the students sum up what they have learned. Students should have a clear understanding of the content of the message, and they should also be able to analyze how the author presents his views, how he begins and ends his essay, and how he links one paragraph with another. In addition to language points, the teacher also sums up the stylistic devices used such as simile, metaphor, alliteration, onomatopoeia, sarcasm, irony, personification, euphemism, antithesis, climax, anticlimax, rhetorical questions, and so on.

Then come exercises, both oral and written. There will be discussions and comments on the content and translation. Students will also be asked to construct sentences and to write outlines, summaries, or compositions using the words, phrases, sentence patterns, and techniques they have just learned.

Our method is eclectic, and special stress is given to paraphrasing. We believe that if a student learns how to paraphrase, he will be able to use the language flexibly--he will not get stuck when he doesn't know a particular word and will be able to express himself in a roundabout way. By paraphrasing we help the student gradually to think in English and consequently to write English rather than Chinglish. Translation is also used, and comparison helps to make students more aware of the peculiarities of English as well as of their native language, Chinese.

We think it important that our students learn how to work independently, for when they graduate, they may be working in some institutions where they will be the only ones that know English at all. Since our students will be interpreters and translators, it is essential that they

understand correctly what others want to say. We stress that they must not overlook or misinterpret a single word, and that any negligence or mistake on their part may have serious consequences. In dealing with a text in intensive reading, we show students how to solve the problems they meet and teach them where to go for various kinds of information. Students are encouraged to use monolingual dictionaries as soon as they enter college, as explanations in bilingual dictionaries can sometimes be confusing and misleading.

If in intensive reading course we stress quality, in extensive reading course we stress quantity. Freshmen are first asked to read 70 to 100 pages a week from a simplified version of a book such as David Copperfield. Gradually they are led to read 50 to 60 pages a week in the original.

The purpose of extensive reading is to broaden the student's knowledge, enlarge his vocabulary, and help him to read with fluency and cultivate a feel for the language. Some of the books chosen for extensive reading are Greek and Bible stories, Madame Curie, The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Anthony Eden's Memoirs, Martin Eden, The French Revolution, The Pacific War as Seen by U. S. Strategists, Witness to History, Roots, Round the World in Eighty Days, and How Life Began.

The teacher provides some background information about the author, his works, and his style. Since it is not necessary for students to understand every word, every sentence, or every paragraph but only to get the gist, they are encouraged not to use the dictionary but to guess at the meaning of the words.

There are questions to be answered about the chief characters and important events. There is also much discussion about and comment on the

book by students in class. They are sometimes asked to retell the basic plot of the story they have read or to write a book report.

Intensive reading and extensive reading course complement each other. Materials for intensive reading are chewed slowly and carefully. Materials for extensive reading are tasted and swallowed. What the student has read in extensive reading class will help him to understand better what he comes across in intensive reading class, and what he learns in intensive reading class will help him appreciate more what he comes across in extensive reading. When a word, a phrase, or a sentence pattern is repeated many times in different contexts, it is engraved on the student's memory. Many of our students are avid readers and have developed the habit of copying down sentences and even paragraphs from books they have read so that they can go over them again later.

In addition to intensive and extensive reading, there are courses in listening, speaking, and writing. Listening and speaking may be separate courses, or they may be combined in one course. In listening (comprehension) classes, students listen to recordings--each about five minutes long--of discussions or conversations by native speakers. The taped documentaries we are currently using were presented to us by the British Council. These tapes are recorded by a wide variety of speakers to demonstrate various accents and to show the various ways people speak. They include conversations between friends and acquaintances on such topics as "Why go abroad?," "Why learn foreign languages?," "Why watch TV?," and "Why are family relationships changing?" and situational dialogues such as "At the supermarket," "At a travel agent's," etc. After each recording is played two or three times, students answer true/false and multiple-choice questions. The questions test general comprehension, not specific detail.

Sometimes students first listen to recordings of films and then answer questions, have discussions, or write summaries. Outside class, students listen to Radio Peking (China's English-language broadcast for foreign audience) and to BBC or VOA. They can also go to our language lab, where they will find hundreds of tapes on various topics. Besides the tapes mentioned above, there are also recorded talks by guest speakers that have been accumulated throughout the years.

In speaking classes, students are often asked to speak impromptu for one minute on a word or topic such as "education," "exam," or "competition." They may also be asked to prepare a three-to-five-minute talk on a question such as "Is it good to have reading and writing contests among students?" or "What are some of the problems of young people today?" After each student has spoken, there is discussion and comment, in which everyone takes an active part. In such classes, students are helped by the teacher as well as by their classmates. They have cultivated the habit of correcting each other's mistakes. Among students, there are also "speaking pairs": one practises speaking with one's partner every day. When the days are warm, one often sees students in groups of two or three taking a walk on the campus after supper and talking merrily or having a heated debate in English. Classes are conducted in English, and students are encouraged to speak English to their teachers and to one another outside class.

Writing may be combined with intensive reading or it may be a separate course. If it is a separate course, it will be creative writing, for which students are usually given topics a week in advance of the due date. After the essays are corrected, the teacher spends an hour commenting on the students' papers. There will also be individual tutorial for those

who need special help. Good compositions are often read aloud in class or displayed in the "wall papers."

When students get to their last two years, they are trained in written translation and oral interpretation. For written translation, they are given articles from newspapers, passages from novels or magazines, or formal speeches by Chinese leaders and state guests to translate from Chinese into English or vice versa. Oral interpretation is based on situational dialogues. Students are taught what to do and say when, for instance, they meet foreign friends at the airport or a foreign visitor falls ill and has to see a doctor. Along with teaching certain formulas for introducing oneself and others and expressing gratitude and regret, teachers also introduce students to some of the customs and habits of native speakers of English. For example, students are told never to ask a lady about her age and not to inquire about another's income. There are also situational dialogues on such topics as "In a people's commune," "At a factory," "In a school," or "At a day-care center." Very often a lesson about the people's commune is concluded with a trip to a nearby people's commune, and all foreign teachers of the institute who speak English are invited. Such trips are rewarding, for we kill two birds with one stone: foreign teachers are happy to have an opportunity to visit a commune in China, and our students are happy to have an opportunity to practise oral interpretation. Consequently, after spending a whole morning or afternoon in a people's commune, all return exhausted but gratified.

This has been a brief description of how we teach the five skills at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute. In China, we are taught from early childhood that one should not show off one's proficiency with an axe before

Lu Ban, the master carpenter--that is, one should not display one's slight skill before an expert. But we also have a wise saying that one casts a brick to attract jade. And it is in this spirit that I offer our experience, hoping that you experts here may give me your valuable opinions and suggestions.